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SUBJECT: ARMENIAN "GENOCIDE" AND THE OTTOMAN ARCHIVES

Classified By: Consul General David Arnett for Reasons 1.5 (b&d)

This is a joint CG Istanbul/Embassy Ankara message.

[11.](#) (sbu) Summary: The lack of agreement and dialogue on the so-called Armenian "genocide" question remains a major obstacle to Turkish-Armenian rapprochement. A long-term resolution of this problematic issue can only be built on an open dialogue and healthy academic debate. Free and complete access to the Ottoman archives, one of the primary repositories for historical evidence during this period, will be critical to building the mutual trust needed for such a debate. Although Turkey has made great strides to open the archives and destigmatize the issue, persistent problems and doubts about the archives continue to undermine efforts to bridge the gulf of misunderstanding between Armenians and Turks on this historical question. End Summary.

[12.](#) (u) The most significant obstacle to Turkish-Armenian reconciliation remains a lack of agreement or even healthy dialogue on the Armenian "question" or what most Turks refer to as the "supposed genocide." The accusations, denials, and counter-accusations on this issue have long obscured most genuine academic debate. Armenian diaspora scholars have amassed scores of eyewitness accounts and narratives detailing the tragic events of 1915-16 that they claim amounted to a genocide of as many as 1.5 million Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire. Turkish historians, meanwhile, have argued that no more than a few hundred thousand Armenians were killed by bandits, disease, and harsh conditions when, in response to the threat posed by Armenian insurgents (and the "massacre" of many Turkish Muslims), much of the Armenian population was deported to Syria and Lebanon.

#### A Question of Identity

[13.](#) (sbu) In addition to thousands of years of recorded history, a rich cultural heritage, and a vibrant Church, for Armenians around the world the 1915-16 events remain a crucial component of their modern identity. Although some Armenians have at times sought retribution through terror and violence (including ASALA terrorism in the 1970s), focus has shifted to a tireless political campaign for recognition of the events as genocide.

[14.](#) (sbu) The Turkish approach to the Armenian issue is complex. From the inception of the Republic, Ataturk and his establishment heirs have asserted that maintenance of a "Turkish identity" -- which Ataturk and his circle developed as an artificial construct and which his political heirs claim is under threat from domestic and foreign enemies -- is essential to the preservation and development of the Republic. Representatives of both the Turkish state and every government to date believe that acknowledging any wrongs inflicted on the Armenians would call into question Turkey's own claims of victimization and its borders, and would make Turkey vulnerable to claims for indemnity. Decades of official denial and the absence of historical accounts or academic debate within Turkey on this taboo issue have deprived Turks today of an objective context in which to process assertions of genocide.

#### Are the Archives Open?

[15.](#) (sbu) Both sides have attempted to use the Ottoman Archives to support their version of events. The Turks have published volumes of documents to bolster their case, while Armenian scholars charge that the Turkish government's obstruction of free access to the archives suggests that they are hiding the "smoking gun" that would prove the genocide. Armenian scholars have long complained that they could not obtain access permits or were obstructed in their research in the archives. Others point to long (and, they say, deliberate) delays in securing permits that often consumed most or all of the time available on grants or sabbaticals. Kevork Bardakchian, head of the Armenian Studies program at the University of Michigan, for example, told poloff that he and other colleagues were simply denied without explanation when they applied for access to the archives in the 1970s and 1980s. An Archive Director in this period spoke openly about the need to "protect" the documents from misuse by hostile foreigners.

[16.](#) (sbu) Turkish and foreign scholars agree that former PM and President Turgut Ozal made a real push to open the archives in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The records were

placed under the supervision of the Prime Ministry, procedures for obtaining research permits were simplified, and efforts to catalog the 150 million documents were accelerated. Everyone we have spoken to concedes that this represented a "sea change" that has continued to this day. According to Turkish archive officials, permits are usually granted within a week, archival staff are helpful, and photocopies of desired documents are readily available at reasonable fees. When poloff visited the Ottoman Archive research room earlier this month, the staff showed him a computerized list of over 300 Americans who have received permission to conduct research there in recent years (over 30 so far this year alone). The catalogs are also freely available through the Archive website over the internet.

17. (sbu) Some restrictions on access remain in place. Turkish officials do not permit access to over 70 million still-uncatalogued documents and claim that many others are too damaged for use by researchers. Moreover, some critics still complain that the Turkish government seeks to block those researching the Armenian question. Prime Ministry State Archive Director Yusuf Sarinay pointed out to poloff that researchers must be legally in Turkey for that purpose, which requires visa approval by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Some researchers continue to have permits delayed or denied altogether (Greek researchers have also been victims of such discrimination in the past). Archive Director Sarinay said that although many American researchers have come to the archives, notably not one has come from Armenia. He speculated that this was because there are no diplomatic relations between Turkey and Armenia - and because of a policy of reciprocity for Armenia supposedly not allowing Turkish researchers into its archives. Turkey's own preeminent Ottoman historian, Halil Inalcik, criticized the Archives' lack of openness in a February 2001 editorial for Radikal daily entitled "The Ottoman Archives Should Be Opened to the World." Despite the criticism, however, the mantra today is "openness" and any talk of "protecting" the archives from foreigners is politically incorrect. Although the Archives Director still has considerable authority to deny access, he would be hard-pressed to explain placing such restrictions on any serious academic researcher.

#### Have the Archives Been Purged?

18. (c) Perhaps more important than the question of access, however, is whether or not the archives themselves are complete. According to Sabanci University Professor Halil Berktaý, there were two serious efforts to "purge" the archives of any incriminating documents on the Armenian question. The first took place in 1918, presumably before the Allied forces occupied Istanbul. Berktaý and others point to testimony in the 1919 Turkish Military Tribunals indicating that important documents had been "stolen" from the archives. Berktaý believes a second purge was executed in conjunction with Ozal's efforts to open the archives by a group of retired diplomats and generals led by former Ambassador Muharrem Nuri Birgi (Note: Nuri Birgi was previously Ambassador to London and NATO and Secretary General of the MFA). Berktaý claims that at the time he was combing the archives, Nuri Birgi met regularly with a mutual friend and at one point, referring to the Armenians, ruefully confessed that "We really slaughtered them." Tony Greenwood, the Director of the American Research Institute in Turkey, told poloff separately that when he was working in the Archives during that same period it was well known that a group of retired military officers had privileged access and spent months going through archival documents. Another Turkish scholar who has researched Armenian issues claims that the ongoing cataloging process is used to purge the archives.

#### Coming to Grips With History

19. (sbu) Turkish attitudes on the genocide issue have evolved over time. Although few have the courage to do so publicly, some intellectuals, academics, and others privately question the official version of events. Ordinary citizens in central and eastern Anatolia often openly acknowledge to us what their grandfathers did to the Armenians. Several visiting American academics have noted that the subject is no longer as taboo as it once was. Publicly, the Turkish establishment (including the nationalist think-tank ASAM, the state Turkish Historical Association, and even the Archives) continues to challenge the assertions of the Armenian diaspora and fire off counter-accusations charging Armenians with having engaged in massive, wide-spread revolts during the war and with having perpetrated wholesale massacres on Turkish Muslims. In recent years the Education Ministry has asked high-school students to compete in an essay competition to deny the genocide (note: Berktaý claims that this idea originated with ASAM and was imposed on the Ministry by ASAM's military contacts). The current government, however, has been noticeably more quiet on the subject than some of its predecessors, dutifully repeating the need to "leave the issue for historians to discuss."

Comment

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10. (c) Although almost a century has passed since the 1915-16 events, the gulf of misunderstanding between the Armenians and Turks on this issue remains considerable. No longer as completely closed a subject as it once was, discussion of the issue in Turkey still remains limited and dominated by the nationalist/establishment line. Even if the current government hopes to put this issue behind them, it is unlikely that they will be able to do more than simply encourage an environment in which a healthy discussion can take place. It is doubtful that, in their current state, the Ottoman Archives will ever deliver a definitive interpretation of the Armenian question, but they will be a focal point and key resource for any Turks and Armenians seeking to engage in genuine research and debate on the issue. To that end, we should support and encourage researchers to continue to push for access to the archival materials and be prepared to approach the Turkish government to discuss any complaints of official obstruction. We request that the Department make us aware of any such complaints.

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